

Deep Waters: Courage, Character, and the Lake Timiskaming Canoeing Tragedy by James Raffan isn't easy to read. It chronicles a Canadian wilderness disaster offering preventative lessons, for those willing to learn.

On Sunday June 11, 1978, twenty-seven boys, aged eleven to thirteen, and four leaders, started from Timiskaming, Quebec heading north for James Bay. It was to be a tough three weeks intended to transform boys into men. They paddled four brand-new, twenty-two foot canoes. A gentle tailwind helped in the morning, but by dark, all four canoes were swamped. Twelve boys and one leader were dead from hypothermia. The following day, the survivors were rescued. A coroner's inquest ruled the deaths accidental.

Raffan is the right person to re-examine this event. He spent his boyhood summers at camps in northern Ontario, learning to swim, canoe, camp and eventually to lead trips in the Canadian wilderness. He knows the theory and practice of education. He has both a Bachelor of Science and a Bachelor of Education. He taught high school, and then he completed a PhD. He instructed at the Queen's University Faculty of Education Outdoor Education Program for eighteen years. Now, he writes about what he learned and what he taught while taking young people on wilderness trips.

The victims were students of a private school, St. John's School of Ontario, now closed. St. John's was formed in reaction to a philosophical shift in education. Public schools had moved from a Dickensian model where teacher, at the head of class, fills silent, obedient pupils with facts, and applies the strap to those unwilling to learn, inattentive or in disfavour. The change was to a curriculum that allowed children to explore, to create and to build personal motives for education. Corporal punishment was discarded. The shift was an attempt to accommodate differences in children and to prepare them for an adulthood where motivation and discipline must come from within.

Ted Byfield, a founder of St. John's, was dissatisfied with the public school system. A former St. John's student recalls Byfield's response when a boy presented a contrary point of view. Byfield would bellow, "when you're older you'll have an opinion, but in the meantime, you don't know anything, so shut up and listen to what I have to say."

Accidents are often preventable, and Raffan enumerates warnings unheeded and steps not taken. In 1926, ten boys and a camp leader drowned while paddling across Balsam Lake in large canoes. The victims had not received canoeing lessons, some were non-swimmers and the capricious lake could change quickly from calm to treacherous.

St. John's did not include paddling lessons, canoe rescue drill, or require minimum swimming or life-saving standards. The new canoes were untested, and modified in ways that reduced their stability. The steersman sat not on the stern seat, but on the stern deck, further reducing stability. Packs were tied into the boat, reducing the ease of righting a capsized vessel. There had been no research into the weather and wave patterns on the lake. At the time of the mishap, the paddlers were crossing the lake to find calmer water that wasn't there. The trip leader was inexperienced. There was an attitude of learning on the fly.

Upon hearing news of the disaster, Ted Byfield responded, "Perfectly hideous. You're always haunted by the dread that something is going to happen - then whack! You take all the safety precautions you can take and then some more ... but it's always luck or the grace of God that saves you."

Raffan leaves conclusions to the reader.